

## **Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents**

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Executive Summary and Paper Commissioned by the National Reading Conference

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### **Executive Summary**

The National Reading Conference (NRC) recognizes the importance of continuing literacy instruction beyond the elementary grades, especially for students at the middle and high school level. In commissioning this paper on *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, the NRC acknowledges the complexities of reading in relation to writing and oral language in an array of 21<sup>st</sup> century media environments, of which print is a part. The term *adolescent literacy*, broader in scope than secondary reading, is also more inclusive of what young people count as texts (e.g., textbooks, digital texts, hypertexts). Many adolescents of the Net Generation find their own reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading to acquire school knowledge of academic texts. This is not to say that academic literacy is unimportant; rather, it is to emphasize the need to address the implications of youth's multiple literacies for classroom instruction. The following statements represent NRC's position on keeping adolescents' interests and needs in mind when designing effective literacy instruction at the middle and high school level.

- Adolescents' perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject area classes (e.g., the sciences, social studies, mathematics, and literature). Thus, if academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement.
- Adolescents respond to the literacy demands of their subject area classes when they have appropriate background knowledge and strategies for reading a variety of texts. Effective instruction develops students' abilities to comprehend, discuss, study, and

write about multiple forms of text (print, visual, and oral) by taking into account what they are capable of doing as everyday users of language and literacy.

- Adolescents who struggle to read in subject area classrooms deserve instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs. To be effective, such instruction must be embedded in the regular curriculum and address differences in their abilities to read, write, and communicate orally as strengths, not as deficits.
- Adolescents' interests in the Internet, hypermedia, and various interactive communication technologies (e.g., chat rooms where people can take on various identities unbeknown to others) suggest the need to teach youth to read with a critical eye toward how writers, illustrators, and the like represent people and their ideas—in short, how individuals who create texts make those texts work. At the same time, it suggests teaching adolescents that all texts, including their textbooks, routinely promote or silence particular views.
- Adolescents' evolving expertise in navigating routine school literacy tasks suggests the need to involve them in higher level thinking about what they read and write than is currently possible within a transmission model of teaching, with its emphasis on skill and drill, teacher-centered instruction, and passive learning. Effective alternatives to this model include participatory approaches that actively engage students in their own learning (individually and in small groups) and that treat texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized (and then all too quickly forgotten).